

# The colours of deception: marble imitations in Alentejo stucco altarpieces

## As cores do engano: imitações de mármore em retábulos de *stucco* no Alentejo

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### Abstract

This paper will discuss how modern interventions changed the image of stucco altarpieces and their original polychromies. These works of art form a consistent group whose presence can still be seen in the Alentejo (Portugal), built between the 16th and 20th centuries. Although its popularity in this region over the centuries cannot be overstated, this artistic heritage has been misunderstood in terms of constituent materials, artisanal construction techniques, and polychrome coatings. All of the mimetic potentials of these altarpieces were laid out in their colourful finishing which successfully imitated other materials, particularly marble. This visual image was irreversibly altered because of intensive whitewashing or modern repainting with synthetic materials. We will examine how local populations have reacted to this historical heritage through various examples, taking into account psychological, cultural, and even economic factors.

### Resumo

Este artigo irá debater a forma como intervenções modernas têm vindo a alterar a imagem e a policromia original dos altares em *stucco*. Estas obras de arte constituem um grupo muito consistente construído entre os séculos XVI e XX e cuja presença ainda é visível no Alentejo (Portugal). Muito embora a sua popularidade, ao longo dos séculos, seja inegável, este património artístico foi incompreendido no que diz respeito aos seus materiais constituintes, técnicas de construção artesanais e revestimentos policromos. De facto, todo o potencial mimético destes retábulos consistia nos seus acabamentos policromos que imitavam, com bastante sucesso, outros materiais, especialmente o mármore. Devido a intensas caiações ou a repintes modernos, com materiais sintéticos, esta imagem visual foi irreversivelmente alterada. Através de vários exemplos e considerando fatores de ordem psicológica, cultural e económica, analisaremos a forma como as populações locais se têm relacionado com este património histórico.

### KEYWORDS

Altarpieces  
Stucco  
Polychromies  
Image  
Interventions

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Retábulos  
*Stucco*  
Policromias  
Imagem  
Intervenções

## Introduction

During the twentieth century, how Portuguese society has related to its historical heritage has been variable. Architectural and artistic heritage is inextricably linked to specific moments in our history, making it vulnerable to inevitable value judgments and prejudices that are difficult to overcome.

This question has become more pressing in recent years, with the deliberate destruction of historical heritage, understood only as a symbol of celebration of a past with which we tend to coexist poorly. The same principle applies to Alentejo's heritage of stucco altarpieces, which have been the target of a wide range of interventions, the majority of which have had disastrous results.

It is not our task to assess the characteristics of each intervention performed on each of the altarpieces presented in this text. Although we can admit they all intended to preserve these pieces, the concept of "conservation" can only be applied in very few situations. The vast majority are the result of interventions carried out on the initiative of local parishes or by well-intentioned volunteers, with unskilled labour and no institutional supervision or regulation.

The main trends guiding these interventions are, on the one hand, the complete erasure of colour (via whitewashing) and, on the other hand, an excess of colour, frequently using an unrealistic palette, ignoring the mimetic function of the original polychromes. The reasons for this duality in the 'intervention preferences' can be numerous, but their outcomes have not aided the reappraisal of stucco altarpieces by our contemporary judgment.

## Colour dilemmas

The way Portuguese society has responded to its cultural legacy was variable through the twentieth century. Even the mere definition of the concept of "major arts" suggests that some fringes of our cultural heritage would unavoidably be regarded as "minor", giving way to prejudiced formulations that have conditioned how we look at our cultural assets.

This is the case with Alentejo's stucco altarpieces which have not yet captured the attention of both scholars and local populations.

Starting from this premise a primary survey of Alentejo's stucco altarpieces began to proceed to their historical and artistic characterization. The vast majority of existent stucco altarpieces in Alentejo date from the late Baroque period [1]. Only six of 54 altarpieces were built before the late eighteenth century. Also, with few exceptions, they all present a poor state of conservation (Figure 1).

Two points were vital to establish in our survey: on the one hand, to determine which materials were preferably imitated; on the other hand, to assess if there was a type of intervention that could have been prevalent over others.

The first point was easily answered: marble was the material that gathered the majority of imitation preferences. As far as we could see, there are some cases where the imitation process (whether concerning specific altarpiece parts or polychromies) was followed with great accuracy. The similarities are so striking that we can't help but be tempted to identify the quarries that supplied the imitated material.

It would be interesting to establish this parallel and determine whether the materials to be imitated are local or come from afar, maybe from other parts of the country or abroad. Unfortunately, today this analysis is out of the question since the majority of altarpieces have their polychrome coverings highly altered, which would lead to less-than-credible conclusions.



**Figure 1.** Altarpieces of: a) S. Mamede hermitage, Portalegre; b) S. João Baptista hermitage, Arronches; c) the cathedral of Portalegre (before restoration works of 2022-2023).



**Figure 2.** Detail of the main altarpiece of São João Baptista hermitage, Fronteira.

The second point to determine was less obvious, as interventions seem to be divided into two broad categories: whitewashing or overpainting the altarpieces. In each case, multiple reasons for selecting one option over the other may exist. First and foremost, there will be the practical need to repair something that has deteriorated. This reason is directly linked to economic factors, an aspect that is always sensitive and determines the course of the intervention and its outcomes. Finally, we must consider the psychological reasons that lead society to decide between the absence or excess of colour in various circumstances. In any case, society's right to use colour is always a good topic of discussion [2] (Figure 2).

Quoting Michel Pastoreau “[...] colour is ‘made’ by society, which gives it definitions and meanings, creates codes and values, organizes its practices, and determines its implications. [...] Colour is always a social issue because man does not live alone but in society. [...]” [3].

It is important to note that the freedom granted in the use of colour inevitably comes with a responsibility that cannot be overlooked, as demonstrated by the following examples that illustrate both sides of this issue.

### **Treatises and studies on stucco – the misuse of colour**

Alentejo has, still today, an impressive number of Baroque stucco altarpieces, though little is known about their production.

Works by Francisco de Liberato Teles and João Segurado [4-5] are frequently cited sources by researchers from different areas of scientific knowledge (architecture, engineering, conservation, and restoration) who have studied who have researched the subject of imitation techniques in vernacular and erudite architecture. After analyzing a set of samples from the country's north and centre, some of these studies recently presented some intriguing findings, about stucco constituent materials [6-7].

Because the literature on stucco in Portugal is limited, the importance of Teles and Segurado's works in this context remains high. According to what is known, craft processes practised at the end of the eighteenth century remained largely unchanged in the subsequent

century; however, in the Alentejo, the use of indigenous materials in mass mixtures and polychromes introduces variants that should be thoroughly examined and compared with the previously mentioned northern case studies.

The treaty of Pascual Diez [8] is the only one exclusively dedicated to stucco altarpieces. It is also the one that is contemporary to this boom in artistic production, and it is critical not only for the recovery of the art of stucco in Spain but also in Portugal because it was most likely a key influence for late-eighteenth-century national altarpieces.

Recognizing the loss of stucco working skills, this clergyman took on the responsibility of recovering all aspects of its practices in 1785, beginning by copying Italian recipes and procedures. Despite his attachment to the Italian legacy, he developed his stucco recipe, which enabled him to produce his altarpieces without relying on foreign artists.

This treatise was already mentioned by Ignacio Gárate Rojas [9-10] in his book on the art of plaster, one of two key works for understanding this technique, as well as limes', which make him so important for the built heritage in the Iberian Peninsula. *Stucco* altarpieces are far from exclusive to the Alentejo; in fact, they should also be studied in the context of Spanish Extremadura, as they are part of a shared visual and cultural legacy in southern Europe, which requires comparative work.

Although no analyses were performed on the altarpieces presented in this paper, many of them are likely to follow Pascual Diez's basic stucco paste recipe: a mixture of gypsum, sand, and lime mixed with water over a structure made of inexpensive materials such as bricks [8]. The most common solution appears to have been the creation of an internal structure made of bricks of various shapes and sizes mixed with lime (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Convent of São Bento de Cástris, detail of a column in a chapel of the cloister, Évora.

Pascual Diez also emphasizes the importance of knowing ornamental stones to reproduce them perfectly in stucco, a principle that has unfortunately been forgotten over time.

This skill was especially important because so much of the value of stucco was found in its ability to imitate other materials, most notably marble. Mineral pigments, which have remarkable resistance when in contact with lime, were used by artists in the pursuit of natural stone imitation. Finally, the painted stucco would be polished, and the resulting shine would be identical to that of real stone.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Liberato Teles [4] also made several references to painted stuccos in his manual for civil engineers, stating the excellence of the craftsman capable of reproducing all the veins, knots, and shades of marble. The author paid special attention to painting techniques, polychrome layering techniques, finishing varnishes, and pigments, naming the most commonly used: white lead, “Italian black” (a dark pigment similar to charcoal), ochre, vermilion, and ultramarine blue.

Although there is a remarkable coherence in the practices described in these texts, any resemblance with the remaining altarpieces is difficult to trace.

In the case of the late Baroque altarpiece at the convent of Nossa Senhora da Estrela (Marvão), built in 1802, the contract provides insights into the significance of stucco work, by indicating very accurately all the materials that should be imitated, different kinds of marble and limestone: “black marble”, “blue stone”, “yellow stone” (imitating stone from Salerno) and finally “red stone” [11]. The reference to the city of Salerno is an uncommon occurrence in similar documental sources.

Such a level of specificity in the materials to be imitated underlines not only the high skills of the stucco artists and the breadth of their knowledge of different stones but also the exquisite tastes of their employers. The concern shown with the accurate imitation of specific stones also highlights the extreme importance that the polychrome layers applied to stucco works are also thoroughly considered when any restoration interventions are undertaken.

In this case, although the altarpiece still exists, broadly preserving its previous appearance, the same cannot be said for its original polychromes, which have been repainted at an undetermined date. The church underwent conservation work in 1938, which included the repair of the walls and ceilings. Later, in 1982, it is likely to have received a more direct intervention in the altarpiece, as documental sources mention work on the door leading to the tribune [12].

Repainting was indeed a very common practice in what concerns altarpieces, virtually deleting important historic elements, like their natural ageing process. Like in any other aspect of artistic heritage, the historical reality (or originality) cannot be strictly limited to a primitive state of the object in question, but also to the multiple contributions time has left on it [3]. This premise, which is elementary in any conservation project, is frequently overlooked when extensive repainting or varnishing is involved (Figure 4).

Excessive and, in many cases, unsuitable, colour use results in the application of tones that do not exist in nature, deviating from the goal of simulating real materials. Because the outcome of these modern and more colourful interventions can be questionable and difficult to understand, Art History has labelled these works as “popular” immediately lowering their artistic value (Figure 5). Although there is no particular data on the date of these repaints, their look suggests that they are recent, most likely from the first decades of the twenty first century.

In another case, the original polychromies were kept, even if some were deemed less than realistic. This is the case with the main altarpiece of Santiago church (Marvão), which adhered to the tradition of an exuberant chromatic palette, a common feature of these art pieces found throughout the region [13].



**Figure 4.** Main altarpiece from the church of Nossa Senhora de Entre as Águas, Avis: a) general view; b) detail of a column.

Following the conservation intervention in 2018, led by the firm *Intonaco*, the local population needed some time to accept the final results, taking into account the colours that were then recovered and displayed. There were no repaints in this case to hide the original painting, but the palette used still surprised the public who frequented the church. Finally, effective communication between the owner (the parish), the conservation technician, and the general public was critical to the preservation of this large-scale stucco altarpiece (Figure 6).



**Figure 5.** Collateral altarpieces: *a)* in the main church of Nossa Senhora da Graça in Assumar, Monforte; *b)* a detail in the hermitage of São João Baptista, Arronches.





Figure 6. Main altarpiece of Santiago church, Marvão.

### The imposing presence of white

White has a diverse symbology that varies according to culture and context. Some of its meanings are widely accepted, while others appear to be contradictory. The colour white represents purity, brightness, divinity, innocence, peace, and wisdom. White can also be associated with hygiene, which is linked to whitewashing procedures in architecture, which are, as we all know, very important in Alentejo.

White, however, has other connotations. It is the colour of coldness, sterility, fear, restlessness, and death. White is the colour's "ground zero" and, like its polar opposite – black – was long considered a "non-colour" [3, 14].

The plural meaning of white may explain its widespread use in southern Portugal, where it is almost an unsettling obsession. Of course, whitewashing has always been (and continues to be) a practical and simple way to address conservation issues, particularly on building facades [15].

However, many national and international researchers have already pointed out other reasons for the use of white. It was also the result of a fundamentalist purism that spread throughout many countries, from Europe to the United States. Following Le Corbusier's idealistic theories opposing anything that might impair architecture's "purity" the refusal to use colour resulted in a declared "chromophobia", which had more impact after the 1940s [16-21].

This was especially noticeable in southern Portugal's historic centres, where the use of white was mandated by municipal regulations to correspond to the traditional image of Mediterranean culture [17].

The same spirit seems to have extended to some interventions in our built heritage, namely in some elements integrated into the architecture, thus creating an aseptic image and setting them apart from excessive and confusing use of colour. Whitewashing buildings' façades and their embellishments is a popular way to avoid degradation problems in this particular region of our country (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Collateral altarpiece of the main church of Fronteira.



**Figure 8.** Altarpiece in the sacristy of the convent of Nossa Senhora da Esperança, Vila Viçosa.

The excessive use of lime, combined with the complete eradication of colour, resulted in an abstract image of architecture, as well as the loss of all its plastic values [18]. This was also what happened with stucco altarpieces, where an excessive amount of whitewashing created an indistinctive image, attenuating forms, volumes, and contrasts. Sometimes, to decrease the “whiteness” effect, other colours were introduced, covering specific parts of the altars (columns, ornamental details). These colours adhered to the “official” palette, which is essentially Alentejo's trademark: aside from white, ochre and blue were also used, although blue had a lesser expression in the case of altarpieces (Figure 8 and Figure 9).

As limited as this appears to be, it has only been the case since the twentieth century, as recent studies on 47 municipalities [21] have revealed that other colours (red, black, or grey) were also used within the architectural context. Given that the stucco altarpieces originally had polychrome coatings, one might wonder what the significance of a completely white piece would be today. The removal of polychromes' mimetic role appears to have not affected the function of these altarpieces as pieces integrated within a liturgical context, where imagery or other objects of devotion are displayed. On the other hand, the problem of intensive whitewashing may eventually eliminate elements in bas-relief, interfering with the set's iconographic reading.

Again, what is standard in Alentejo architecture also can be applied to stucco altarpieces. The excessive whitewash on these pieces is primarily a matter of presentation. Local parishioners, who frequently come to the rescue to prevent further damage, diligently preserve places of worship that continue to be used in their normal capacity. The same phenomenon occurs in cases of degraded wall paintings that are covered in layers of lime, often condemning them to oblivion. Whitewashing is an effective solution that avoids more “imaginative” approaches. In the end, perhaps white is easier to accept after all.



**Figure 9.** Main altarpiece of the church of Misericórdia of Montargil.

## Conclusion

With this text, we attempted to demonstrate that, while the majority of stucco altarpieces were condemned to abandonment, others were subjected to disastrous interventions, severely compromising this cultural heritage. A never-ending cycle of lime washing and overpainting has become the norm, either way ruining the original polychrome coatings.

Nowadays the majority of the remaining altarpieces have no match between modern polychrome coatings and the documental references to specific stones (both local and foreign) to be mimetically reproduced. The modern colour palette that has been imposed on stucco altarpieces has irreversibly corrupted their mimetic potential. For our modern society, the identification of ornamental stones (like marble) imitated through painting is secondary. The colours used in the repaints are, many times, merely decorative, distancing themselves from the symbolic reference to the object of imitation.

It is important to reconsider what image modern society chooses to maintain of this artistic heritage, as this decision will play an important role in any well-planned conservation plan. This will undoubtedly be a key point for the future of stucco altarpieces.

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